

Though not all directors are capable of, or interested in, making films that reach the status of art and convey a powerful message, the influential directors discussed in this section have shown that the director can make the film her or his own, an artistic statement as personal as a novel, a poem, a painting, or a symphony. This concept gave rise to a theory of film criticism that focused heavily on the director: auteur theory.

8.3 Auteur Theory

Given the importance of the director's role in the making of a movie and how easily identifiable certain cinematic styles can be throughout the work of some directors, it is often convenient to discuss a film as though the director were the sole creator, like the author of a book. *Auteur* is the French word for author, and therein lies the meaning of **auteur theory**. When applied to film directing, auteur theory posits that the director is indeed the author of the film, imprinting it with her or his personal vision. This can be an excellent starting point for analyzing certain films, both thematically and stylistically, and is in fact exactly how the auteur theory got started. Film critic and theory in the French film magazine *Cahiers du Cinéma* (*Notebooks on Cinema*) in 1954. The theory gives enormous, almost total responsibility for a film's success or failure (artistically, not at the box office) to the director.

future director François Truffaut put forth the



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Ronald Grant/Everett Collection

French New Wave directors such as François Truffaut, whose set for the film *Day for Night* is pictured here, began as critics who championed the director as the author (auteur) of the film.

The theory was not, and is not, universally accepted. Film critics Pauline Kael and Andrew Sarris kept a running feud going in various magazines about the validity of the theory well into the 1960s. Sarris championed it, while Kael, always opposed to the over-intellectualization of movies, attacked it, writing in *Film Quarterly* in 1963, “‘Interior meaning’ seems to be what those in the know know. It’s a mystique—and a mistake” (p. 20). Film studies professor Raymond Haberski (2001) summarized Kael’s argument: “How was one to guess what art was and was not based on a logic that seemed hidden to all other critics?” (p. 129). (It is quaint, and somewhat romantic, to think back to a time when film critics were such an important part of the conversation regarding movies and their cultural impact.) When we apply auteur theory as the lens through which we analyze films, we must always keep in mind that film is a visual art form, and it is therefore artistic. See Table 8.1 for examples of some directors who can be considered auteurs.

Table 8.1: Notable auteur directors and key films

D. W. Griffith	<i>The Birth of a Nation, Intolerance, Trueheart Susie, Broken Blossoms, Way Down East, Orphans of the Storm, America, Isn't Life Wonderful?, The Battle of the Sexes, The Struggle</i>
Frank Capra	<i>American Madness, It Happened One Night, Mr. Deeds Goes to Town, Lost Horizon, You Can't Take It With You, Mr. Smith Goes to Washington, Meet John Doe, It's a Wonderful Life</i>

Alfred Hitchcock	<i>The Lodger, The 39 Steps, The Lady Vanishes, Suspicion, Shadow of a Doubt, Spellbound, Notorious, Rope, Strangers on a Train, Rear Window, Vertigo, North by Northwest, Psycho, The Birds, Family Plot</i>
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(continued)

Table 8.1: Notable auteur directors and key films (continued)

John Ford	<i>The Iron Horse, Hangman's House, Pilgrimage, The Informer, Stagecoach, The Grapes of Wrath, How Green Was My Valley, They Were Expendable, My Darling Clementine, She Wore a Yellow Ribbon, The Quiet Man, The Searchers, The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance</i>
Akira Kurosawa	<i>No Regrets for Our Youth, Drunken Angel, Stray Dog, Rashomon, Seven Samurai, Throne of Blood, The Hidden Fortress, Yojimbo, High and Low, Sanjuro, Red Beard, Dersu Uzala, Kagemusha, Ran, Dreams</i>
Ingmar Bergman	<i>Sawdust and Tinsel, Smiles of a Summer Night, The Seventh Seal, Wild Strawberries, The Magician, The Virgin Spring, Through a Glass Darkly, Winter Light, The Silence, Persona, Hour of the Wolf, Shame, Cries and Whispers, Scenes From a Marriage, The Magic Flute, Fanny and Alexander</i>
Jean-Luc Godard	<i>Breathless, A Woman Is a Woman, Contempt, Les Carabiniers, My Life to Live, Band of Outsiders, A Married Woman, Le Petit Soldat, Pierrot le Fou, Masculine-Feminine, La Chinoise, Weekend, Tout va bien, Film Socialisme</i>
Michelangelo Antonioni	<i>Story of a Love Affair, Il Grido, L'Avventura, La Notte, Eclipse, Red Desert, Blowup, Zabriskie Point, The Passenger, Identification of a Woman</i>
David Lynch	<i>Eraserhead, The Elephant Man, Dune, Blue Velvet, Wild at Heart, Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me, The Straight Story, Lost Highway, Mulholland Drive, Inland Empire</i>
Martin Scorsese	<i>Mean Streets, Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore, Taxi Driver, New York, New York, The Last Waltz, Raging Bull, The King of Comedy, After Hours, The Color of Money, The Last Temptation of Christ, Goodfellas, Cape Fear, The Age of Innocence, Casino, Gangs of New York, The Departed, Shutter Island, Hugo, The Wolf of Wall Street</i>
Steven Spielberg	<i>Duel, The Sugarland Express, Jaws, Close Encounters of the Third Kind, 1941, Raiders of the Lost Ark, E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial, Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom, The Color Purple, Empire of the Sun, Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade, Hook, Schindler's List, Munich, A.I., War Horse</i>
Julie Taymor	<i>Titus, Across the Universe, The Tempest</i>
Spike Lee	<i>She's Gotta Have It, School Daze, Do the Right Thing, Mo' Better Blues, Jungle Fever, Malcolm X, Crooklyn, Clockers, Girl 6, Bamboozled, Miracle at St. Anna, Oldboy</i>
Kathryn Bigelow	<i>Near Dark, Point Break, Strange Days, The Weight of Water, The Hurt Locker, Zero Dark Thirty, Detroit</i>

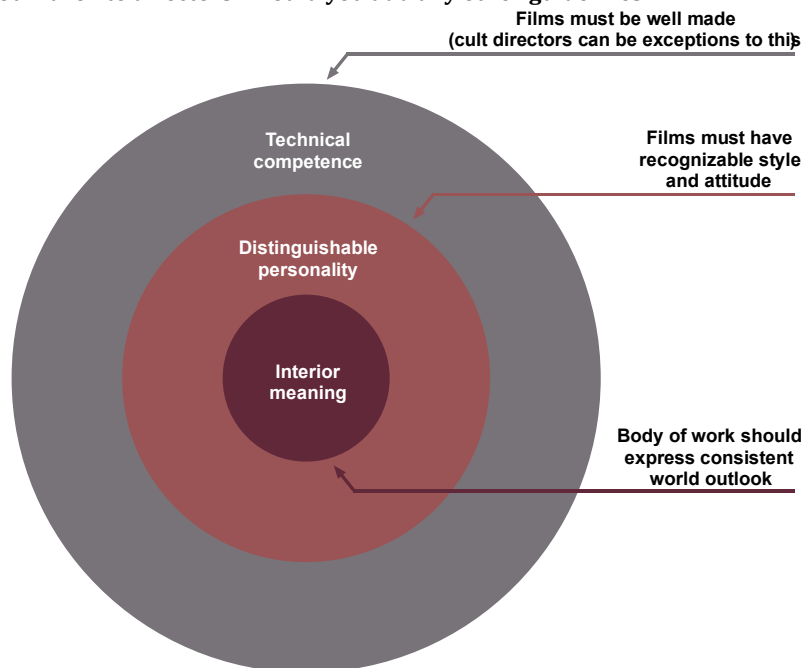
Sofia Coppola	<i>The Virgin Suicides, Lost in Translation, Marie Antoinette, Somewhere, The Bling Ring, The Beguiled</i>
Bong Joon-ho	<i>The Host, Mother, Snowpiercer, Okja, Parasite</i>
Ana Lily Amirpour	<i>A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night, The Bad Batch, Mona Lisa and the Blood Moon, Cliffhanger</i>
Taika Waititi	<i>Eagle vs Shark, Boy, What We Do in the Shadows, Hunt for the Wilderpeople, Thor: Ragnarok, Jojo Rabbit, Thor: Love and Thunder</i>
Barry Jenkins	<i>Medicine for Melancholy, Moonlight, If Beale Street Could Talk, The Underground Railroad, an upcoming Lion King prequel</i>

Sarris's Definitions

Despite the misgivings of Kael, one of the most influential American critics of the 20th century, the auteur theory is still a generally accepted way of critiquing films. Sarris, who is credited with popularizing auteur theory in the United States, defined auteur theory in specific ways that we will use here (see Figure 8.1), which others may or may not apply to their own understanding of what makes an auteur.

Figure 8.1: Sarris's guidelines for director as auteur

Andrew Sarris outlined three specific ways to distinguish an auteur. Do you find that these guidelines can be applied to your favorite directors? Would you add any other guidelines?



Technical Competence

Sarris (1962) breaks the auteur theory into three concentric circles, the first of which is the outer circle, **technical competence**. It may seem obvious, but, at least according to Sarris,

technical competence is one requirement of the auteur; he famously wrote, “A great director has to be at least a good director” (as cited in Bordwell, 2001, p. 170). This is somewhat misleading, as the definition of “competent” is something that is difficult to quantify. A director such as Michael Bay, who has directed *Bad Boys*, *Transformers*, *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen*, and *The Rock*, is technically proficient, even gifted, in that he blows things up in noisy and entertaining ways. This delights audiences; his films have made nearly \$1.5 billion at the box office. Yet most serious critics would not consider him an auteur in the classic sense. If one holds them up to most standards of critical evaluation (for example, the truth test we discussed in Chapter 1), his movies simply aren’t that “good,” at least not good at rewarding in-depth analysis searching for deeper layers of meaning. Among films that he has directed or produced, critics have given him a 6% positive rating on RottenTomatoes.com, a website that aggregates reviews from major critics around the country.

On the other hand, there’s a director like Quentin Tarantino. His movies are just as technically good—and as distinctive—as Bay’s. But he is also very much an idiosyncratic “author” of his films (he writes the scripts), marrying technical competence with a personal passion, providing a much more satisfying experience. Exceptions to this technical competence criterion are directors like Ed Wood (*Glen or Glenda*, *Bride of the Monster*, *Plan 9 from Outer Space*) and Dwain Esper (*Narcotic*, *Maniac*, *Sex Madness*), whose films have achieved cult status for their sheer incompetence as much as their peculiar twisted bizarreness. Yet many consider Wood and Esper to be auteurs, as they fit squarely into the nexus of Sarris’s criteria.

Implicit in the analysis of technical competence, the overarching yet subjective rubric for distinguishing the work of an auteur from that of the average director, is **artfulness**—artistry, craft, aesthetic mastery. It is, of course, subjective—we each have different appreciations of and criteria for artfulness—and there’s no universal right or wrong when judging a film’s artfulness. However, one thing that the films of auteur directors have in common is a cohesive aesthetic and thematic beauty (even if the subject is inherently ugly or violent, as is the case with Tarantino’s films). This quality might be viewed as synonymous with style, but it is ultimately the glue that connects technical competence to distinguishable personality and interior meaning.

At this point, we might revisit the truth test from Chapter 1 (see Table 8.2) and apply it to the work of directors in considering how they fit the model of auteur theory.

Table 8.2: Quick criteria for evaluating a film (or any work of art)

Truth test	Is the film true to itself?	Does the film explore some deep truth about human nature?	
Goethe’s questions	What is the filmmaker trying to say?	How well was it said?	Was it worth saying?

Distinguishable Personality

A **distinguishable personality** is the middle circle in Sarris’s theory. For

instance, the films of Alfred Hitchcock—one of the auteurs Truffaut identifies in his original essay—display an easily identifiable personality, or style, as we discussed earlier.

They may be macabre, creepy, and sometimes downright scary: Movies such *Psycho*, *Rear Window*, and *North by Northwest* share a gleefully dark look at humanity, while at the same time managing to be tremendously entertaining. When considering a director's body of work, then, a distinct personality will often come to the fore. David Lynch's dark take on life in *Eraserhead* and *Blue Velvet* is one clear example; though often described as weird, his films are enjoyable and sometimes moving through his use of humor and identifiable technique. As with Hitchcock, Tarantino, Spielberg, Capra, and many others, audiences approach some directors' films expecting certain things, because of their track history.



Courtesy Everett Collection

Director Frank Capra is best known for his sympathetic portraits of ordinary Americans, such as his film *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (pictured). Many of his films made during the Great Depression capture a sense of enduring American values. Among his most popular works, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* portrays an optimism and idealism about the political process, which may seem unfamiliar or naïve to 21st-century audiences.

A flaw crops up in this “personality” aspect of the theory, however. How can we explain a director like Danny Boyle, whose eclectic body of work includes such diverse titles as *Slumdog Millionaire*, *Trainspotting*, and *28 Days Later*? He willfully chooses to bounce from one genre to another to keep himself interested. Thus, Boyle seemingly strikes down the distinguishable personality aspect of the auteur theory. And yet all serious critics would consider Boyle, winner of an Academy Award for *Slumdog Millionaire*, a brilliant director. But is he an auteur? He certainly has great command over his films, and they have a distinctive feel, though it's somewhat hard to describe; *offbeat* comes as close as any term to doing it justice. The auteur theory is not always a perfect form for analyzing films, as Boyle and his work illustrate.

Interior Meaning

The least specific of Sarris's terms, **interior meaning**—his third circle—would seem to involve the distinguishable personality spread over a director's collected works. What is she or he trying to accomplish? What is he or she trying to say? (Think back again to our truth test.) Sarris isn't really clear, so it's left to others to try to sort it out. Some find Sarris's insistence that it can't actually be described in words to be a bit much, while recognizing that a common interior meaning is something that is felt by the viewer, the way a director's personality is expressed through her or his films' techniques, attitudes, and choices of subject material.

Paul Thomas Anderson's films *Magnolia*, *Punch-Drunk Love*, and *There Will Be Blood* are all compelling portraits of loneliness and obsession. One can trace this thread, this theme, throughout most of his films. This is an example of an auteur's interior meaning. Though

relatively new to directing, Jordan Peele, in his films *Get Out* and *Us*, translates the very real issues of race in the United States into stylish, evocative, and frightening horrors, while still staying true to his beginning in the sketch comedy show *Key & Peele*. Certainly, the case can be made for any director's interior meaning, but some directors demonstrate as much investment in the film's message as they do in its look and feel.

Controversy and Debate Surrounding Auteur Theory

As discussed previously, the auteur theory is far from foolproof, when it comes to both making movies and analyzing them. There are simply too many holes in the theory. As Pauline Kael points out, some great films are made by directors who willfully show a disdain for what is commonly thought of as technical competence. (Kael, who died in 2001, might well have appreciated the do-it-yourself charms of a film like *Paranormal Activity*, which is filmed like a glorified home movie yet is still a powerfully frightening experience—in part because of the pseudo-amateur nature of the filmmaking.)

Others decry the auteur theory on the basis of the collaborative nature of making films. Why should the director be placed above the screenwriter or the actors in terms of influencing the outcome of the movie? Therefore, it's necessary to understand the auteur theory but not become controlled by it. Although an imperfect method of thinking about the director's role, the auteur theory is still a valid and crucial one, recognizing the personal stamp that the best filmmakers put on their films, elevating them from mere entertainment to something more substantial.

It is important to note that a film's auteur need not necessarily be the director. Sometimes producers, screenwriters, or even actors have the most obvious and identifiable control over the films they're involved with. Writer auteurs such as Joss Whedon, Charlie Kaufman, John Huston, Billy Wilder, and Preston Sturges, among others, have gone the next step to become directors or producers of their own scripts, whereas other non-director auteurs with power prefer to hire the writers, producers, directors, cinematographers, or actors who can help achieve their vision. Some actors (e.g., Johnny Depp, Sylvester Stallone, and Mel Gibson) have the power to choose their own scripts, directors, and producers and thus might be considered just as much an auteur as a powerful director, whether or not they actually produce or direct themselves on screen.



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Though Michael Bay is renowned for his technical proficiency, his recognizable voice, and grand explosions, it can be argued that his *Transformers* films lack interior meaning, thus challenging his status as an auteur.

8.4 Some Pacesetters

So many directors have done so much good work that a comprehensive accounting of them and their films would fill several books. However, it is instructive to examine the body of work of a few whose work is both good enough and distinctive enough to serve as examples for the study of directing. These are auteurs in the sense that we have defined, maintaining almost complete control over their films. This is not necessarily a guarantee of success or quality; sometimes complete control can hinder the development of a film. But generally speaking, these directors make the films that they want to make, mostly for better, though occasionally for worse. Many, but not all, of the films by the following directors demonstrate the hallmarks of the auteur.

Martin Scorsese

Martin Scorsese's body of work is ambitious, yet it falls back on familiar themes: violence and guilt delivered in an intense style. These are present in *Mean Streets* (1973), the story of a local hood trying to advance himself. Robert De Niro's slow-motion entrance into a bar set to the strains of "Jumpin' Jack Flash" by the Rolling Stones is powerful, as well as influential. Quentin Tarantino and others would also use rock music to shape scene and character. *Taxi Driver* (1976) established both Scorsese and De Niro as major players in the film industry. In this film, De Niro, with whom Scorsese has made nine films to date, plays a taxi driver who slowly turns violent; Jodie Foster stars as an underage prostitute. Scorsese's choices of themes and style were groundbreaking, particularly his use of violence in the climactic confrontation. The film was controversial upon its release (and years later, when John Hinckley Jr. said he was inspired to shoot Ronald Reagan by his obsession with Foster's character), but it showed Scorsese to be almost fearless in his work.

Raging Bull (1980) again paired De Niro and Scorsese, with De Niro playing boxer Jake LaMotta. Shot in black and white, the film's intense brutality and violence are often rendered in slow motion when LaMotta is in the ring. *Goodfellas* is another example of Scorsese's use of male camaraderie and violence, as it tells the story of real-life gangster Henry Hill. Scorsese revisited the same themes in *Gangs of New York* and *The Departed*. In both *Goodfellas* and *Gangs of New York*, we can see Scorsese's style in each film's respective long take. An avowed film fan himself, Scorsese marries technical prowess with a distinct point of view in his best films, yet he could depart from his familiar gritty urban subject material in films as diverse as *The Age of Innocence*, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, and *Hugo*. This shows his versatility as a director and his evolving interest in stories that don't fit a single mold.

Steven Spielberg

The most popular director in history, in terms of both the box office—as of this writing, his films have made more than \$10 billion combined (Hooton, 2018)—and, arguably, love from the audience, Spielberg has taken sometimes maddening diversions into simplistic, feel-good territory, yet his career also includes seminal films such as *Jaws*, *Schindler's List*, and *Saving Private Ryan*. Capable of making exceptional entertainment, such as *Minority Report* and

Raiders of the Lost Ark, Spielberg is typically at his best combining his innate sweet nature with a mistrust of authority figures—in other words, a childlike point of view. Perhaps the ultimate expression of this is his film *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982), a story about an alien found by a lonely boy who must keep him from nefarious government agents and scientists.

E.T. became Spielberg's signature film, for both good and bad. Although the original film is brilliant, a near-perfect depiction of childhood hopes and fears, for the 20th anniversary edition Spielberg digitally altered the movie. Among other changes, he replaced guns being held by police officers with walkie-talkies, an apt example of his yearning for innocence, sometimes at the expense of narrative truth. (Later tinkering in future releases would restore the guns.)

Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975) was the first true summer blockbuster. Spielberg did not write the script; however, he crafted a terrifying film from Peter Benchley's book about a massive great white shark terrorizing a New England town. It was the first film to have a **wide release**, or to be distributed nationwide on the same date. It also pioneered the practice of television advertising. Yet for all of this, it wouldn't have been a success without Spielberg's genius, both in creating a sense of fear in the audience (including the use of John Williams's score when the shark was about to attack) and in getting believable performances out of his cast. There is just enough humor to leaven the horror, making the film immensely satisfying.

Spielberg also made more "mature" films, such as *Schindler's List*, the story of a German businessman who saved Jewish workers from the Holocaust. This film—along with *Saving*

Private Ryan, a World War II drama, and *Munich*, a dramatic telling of the aftermath of the massacre of Israeli athletes during the 1972 Summer Olympics—established Spielberg not just as a popular craftsman but also as a serious auteur. It is in this vein that Spielberg has also given voice to the stories of repressed people. His films *Amistad*, *The Color Purple*, and *Lincoln* directly address the United States' history of slavery and segregation. These serious films might seem in opposition to his lighter, more entertainment-driven work, but they are demonstrative of his great range as a storyteller. After his initial directing successes, he would often serve as an influential producer or executive producer—instead of director—on many projects that interested him, but he could also return to his popular roots to direct three more *Indiana Jones* films or to blend serious fact-based World War I history with popular sentimental elements and lush Hollywood style in *War Horse*.



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***Schindler's List* was a departure from Spielberg's typical family fare. It is a profoundly personal film, and it led to his creating the Shoah Foundation, which has recorded thousands of testimonies from survivors of the Holocaust.**

Ingmar Bergman

Ingmar Bergman is a hugely influential Swedish director, screenwriter, and producer who championed deeply personal filmmaking while tackling difficult existential topics such as faith, good and evil, and human nature. In films such as *Wild Strawberries*, *The Seventh Seal*, and *Fanny and Alexander*, Bergman used an almost novelistic approach to tell his stories. In *The Seventh Seal* (1957), for instance, Antonius Block (Max von Sydow), a knight home from the Crusades, plays chess with Death (Bengt Ekerot) as his homeland is ravaged by the Black Plague. Death has come for Block as well, but he puts him off with the game while pondering questions such as the existence of God.

In films such as *Persona*, Bergman ventured into more experimental and self-referential “metafiction” and later would imbue Mozart’s comic opera *The Magic Flute* with his own visual and thematic sensibilities (emphasizing both the dark duality of human nature and the storytelling tradition itself). Bergman’s film of *The Magic Flute* (1975) begins with an audience watching a stage performance before fully entering into the comic drama, thus becoming a cinematic meditation on the nature of art and performance. Bergman’s intensely personal films influenced filmmakers such as Woody Allen, Robert Altman, and Stanley Kubrick, who also brought a personal approach to their films.

Nicole Holofcener

Though she has made only five feature films—she has worked on such television shows as *Six Feet Under* and *Sex and the City* as well—Holofcener has proved to be a master at capturing small moments and genuine dialogue (she also writes her films). In films such as *Walking and Talking*, *Lovely and Amazing*, and *Enough Said*, she has proved particularly adept at finding a voice for women, who are typically underserved in movies. Watching her films sometimes feels like dropping in on a conversation, perhaps one that is uncomfortable. This is particularly true in *Please Give* (2010), which most critics argue may be her best movie. The characters—a husband and wife who run a



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Nicole Holofcener’s films give audiences a realistic and sometimes uncomfortable glimpse into the characters’ lives. She elicits raw emotions and expressions from her actors.

snobby vintage-furniture store in New York, their daughter who lusts after a \$235 pair of jeans, a mean old lady next door and her granddaughters—represent various forms of duplicity and guilt, and Holofcener, as in her previous films, is able to home in on their true emotions. It’s not always comfortable to watch, but it feels real, which is a testament to her technical proficiency and her ability to plumb the depths of characters for interior meaning. The same goes for *Enough Said* (2013), a story of a divorced woman who befriends another divorced woman at a party and starts dating a man she meets at the same party, gradually

coming to the horrible realization that they are ex-spouses when they begin to complain to her about her other new friend. Holofcener's ear for dialogue and ability to tell stories in such a naturalistic fashion may not lead to her helming a blockbuster, but her small, quiet films are a thoughtful depiction of everyday lives.

Quentin Tarantino

Quentin Tarantino grew up a film fanatic. His work as a clerk in a video store, where he watched films compulsively, informed his cinematic vocabulary, allowing him to "quote" films that affected him when he began making films of his own. His films are wholly original, which gives them a quality that audiences respond to. In films such as *Reservoir Dogs*, *Pulp Fiction*, and *Kill Bill*, Tarantino uses violence in an almost operatic fashion, with bloodshed an integral part of his storytelling technique. The combination of his technical mastery and an almost gleeful use of violence sometimes masks the serious work of an auteur. While Tarantino's films may not be as strictly personal as, say, Bergman's, they are unique and easily recognizable as his own.

This approach has not been met with universal favor. In *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), for instance, a scene in which Michael Madsen's character cuts off the ear of a policeman he is holding hostage while dancing to the song "Stuck in the Middle With You" offended some audiences and critics. Tarantino's disregard for traditional linear narrative structure in *Pulp Fiction* (and, again, its use of violence) also drew complaint. Yet if one looks beyond the shock value, one finds a commentary on the stupidity of random violence, or the more realistic way in which memories are accessed in telling stories. With *Inglourious Basterds* (2009), Tarantino's love for film and disregard for traditional storytelling allowed him to portray a world in which film literally ended World War II. In this film more than most, Tarantino crams in numerous references and allusions to film history, technology, and the filmmaking process that can be recognized only by others as deeply into all aspects and genres of cinema as he is. In *Django Unchained* (2012), he does a somewhat similar historical wish-fulfillment fantasy loaded with movie allusions, this time with a story set in the Old West and the Deep South before the American Civil War. The audacity (some might say "self-indulgence") and expertise involved in his films are breathtaking and available only to those in full command of their gifts—an auteur.

Sofia Coppola

Coppola's introduction to the mainstream film world was not exactly a welcome one: Her performance as Mary Corleone in *The Godfather: Part III*, her father Francis's lackluster follow-up to his brilliant first two *Godfather* films, was almost universally panned. She fared far better when she stepped behind the camera. The five features she has directed, *The Virgin Suicides*, *Lost in Translation*, *Marie Antoinette*, *Somewhere*, and *The Bling Ring*, reveal a rarity among directors: a unique vision and sensibility. Quirky, personal, offbeat, and entertaining, Coppola's body of work

has won high praise (as well as an Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay for *Lost in Translation*; she was also nominated for Best Director). Perhaps it is not surprising that a life spent in film would lead to such an eclectic career in storytelling—the long stretches of boredom achieved through holding shots a beat or two too long in *Somewhere*

(2010) contrast greatly with the lush and colorful mise-en-scène of *Marie Antoinette* (2006), in which she used bands such as New Order and Gang of Four in the soundtrack to help tell the story of the 18th-century queen of France. Only 28 when *The Virgin Suicides* was released in 1999, she remains one of the most original directors of her generation.

Spike Lee



FOCUS FEATURES/SATO, YOSHIO/Album alb441781/SuperStock **Sofia Coppola's directing style is unique and offbeat, seen especially in the film *Lost in Translation*.**

Lee's film is filled with a kind of in-your-face beauty and masterful technique, entertaining yet unflinching in its honesty. *Do the Right Thing* could have been made only by someone with personal experience with racial relations. The story is told not just through the prism of race but through Lee's singular point of view. Most directors run

from racially charged issues, whether out of political correctness or out of the fear of offending or alienating a paying audience. Lee embraces such controversy in his films. This allows him the freedom to say what he wants and to say it in a manner almost unequaled elsewhere. When it was released in 1989 (and to this day), *Do the Right Thing* was condemned by many as an incitement to racial violence and exploitation of ethnic **stereotypes** (overly simplified characterizations of something or someone, especially due to race, nationality, geographic region, or economic status, among other qualities); at the same time, others praised the film as a vivid dramatization of the senseless tragedy that racial bigotry and irresponsible behavior can lead to. Many critics consider it his mas-

Directors of diverse backgrounds have historically been underrepresented in mainstream film, though this is changing, thanks in part to the precedent set by Spike Lee. Lee has made deeply personal films for almost his entire career, never shying away from race. In movies such as *Do the Right Thing*, *Malcolm X*, *Jungle Fever*, *Bamboozled*, and *Miracle at St. Anna*, Lee tackles issues such as prejudice and disaffection with passion, empathy, and, often, humor. Unafraid to court controversy, he uses his films as statements, casting a harsh light on the treatment of African Americans. In *Do the Right Thing*, for instance, which Lee wrote, directed, coproduced, and played a leading role in, he offers an unflinching examination of racial relations in a Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood in Brooklyn. Tensions on a hot summer day erupt into violence and tragedy, with Lee leaving the audience to decide whether his character, who throws a garbage can through the pizzeria where he works, has indeed done the right thing. He ends the film with contradictory quotes from Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X on the justification of violence. A sprawling film, it incorporates elements of drama and comedy while depicting the fragile truce with which people of various races coexist within the community.



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Spike Lee burst onto the scene fresh out of NYU's film school. *She's Gotta Have It* (pictured) was fresh and bold and showed a world unfamiliar to many audiences.

terpiece. Such conflicting interpretations reveal that Lee achieved his primary purpose—to get people to think about the issues.

Kathryn Bigelow

Much like Lee, Bigelow occupies a unique position among directors—a woman who is a member of the “boys’ club” that film directing often seems to be, and the only woman to win an Academy Award for Best Director (for *The Hurt Locker*). Bigelow’s films often stake out traditionally male territory—action movies—with an energy and originality that bristles. As film critic Manohla Dargis wrote in *The New York Times*,

Gender is the least remarkable thing about her kinetic filmmaking, which gets in your head even as it sends shock waves through your body. . . . She still makes relationship movies, but the relationships evolve both through the chatter at which women are supposed to excel and the contact of bodies, often male, sometimes female, running, surfing, parachuting, living, and dying out in the world. (Dargis, 2009)

Despite the accolades rightly given for *The Hurt Locker*, perhaps a more interesting example of Bigelow’s work is *Near Dark* (1987), her offbeat take on the vampire film. In one memorable scene, vampires descend upon a dive bar and dispatch every representation of American macho sensibility residing inside, quickly and, as the saying goes, with extreme prejudice. Yet despite its action and violence, *Near Dark* remains a rural romance at its heart. Bigelow’s original take is fascinating, entertaining, and wholly her own.

Bigelow is not above controversy. Her 2012 film *Zero Dark Thirty*, about the search for and eventual killing of Osama Bin Laden, was almost universally praised by critics, yet some attacked what they saw as the depiction of torture leading to useful information in the hunt. Bigelow and screenwriter Mark Boal deny this; as with most accomplished filmmakers, Bigelow allows the audience members to make up their own mind, a distinction sometimes lost among those who complain about the film.

Wes Anderson

Wes Anderson is among the more eccentric modern directors to make films using major stars (frequently Owen Wilson and Bill Murray) that are often able to gain mainstream acceptance while displaying his quirky and very personal style. Among his directorial work are *Rushmore*, *The Royal Tenenbaums*, *The Fantastic Mr. Fox*, *The Darjeeling Limited*, *Moonrise Kingdom*, and *The Grand Budapest Hotel*. His films tend to showcase dysfunctional or unusual relationships, especially within families. All of Anderson's features have won or been nominated for numerous critical awards for their unique visions. Many have found substantial commercial success as well, although some viewers are turned off or confused by his peculiar stylized approaches to framing scenes, sets that function like dollhouses, and his often unlikeable characters. Unlike other directors, Anderson is heavily involved in every aspect of tailoring the *mise-en-scène* to his specifications, such that his sets are as much a character in each film as are the actors. Anderson has also coproduced films with similar themes directed by other quirky auteurs such as Noah Baumbach and Peter Bogdanovich.



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Wes Anderson's films, such as *Moonrise Kingdom* (pictured), have a stylized, almost picture-book feel that is evident in both the way they are shot as well as the unique, offbeat characters he chooses to represent.

Steve McQueen

Though he only has three feature films and the five-part anthology series *Small Axe* under his belt, Steve McQueen has established himself as one of the more artful and daring directors of his generation. His films *Hunger* and *Shame*, both starring Michael Fassbender, tackle complex personal struggles. *Hunger* (2008) takes on the 1981 IRA hunger strike at Maze Prison in Northern Ireland. Fassbender portrays Bobby Sands, a political prisoner who believes so deeply in the IRA cause that he undertakes a 66-day-long hunger strike, which eventually kills him. Critic David Edelstein calls it "a political remake of *The Passion of the Christ*, only more aestheticized: It's rigorous, evocative, and, in spite of its grisly imagery, elegant" (Edelstein, 2009, para. 7).

In *Shame* (2011), Fassbender plays Brandon, a 30-something New Yorker struggling with sex addiction. The film portrays isolation and loneliness in a visceral, yet stylized way. When

Brandon's estranged sister arrives at his apartment for an indefinite stay, the privacy to which he is accustomed, and needs in order to feed his addiction, is threatened, and he begins to fall apart. Andrew O'Hehir wrote that "it's first and foremost a visual and sonic symphony, and a Dante-esque journey through a New York nightworld where words are mostly useless or worse" (2011, para. 3). It is the visual cool elegance that cements McQueen's status as a singular director and sets him up for the major success of his third film, *12 Years a Slave*.

12 Years a Slave (2013) not only achieved major box-office success but also won the Academy Award for Best Picture in 2013, making McQueen the first African-British director and producer to win an Academy Award. *12 Years a Slave* tells the story of Solomon Northup, a free black man, who is kidnapped and forced back into slavery in the South. This is a film that continues McQueen's exploration of extreme psychological and physical abuse (whether external or self-inflicted). Like the other directors discussed here, Steve McQueen can be expected to deliver in telling similarly challenging stories.

8.5 How Directors Do It

Despite their importance in the making of a film, one might spend days on a movie set and never be quite sure just what it is, exactly, that the director does. That's because each director works in his or her own way. Some work almost as CEOs of a company, delegating and overseeing the work of others. To be sure, the final film's content, look, and style rest with them, but they allow trusted crewmembers to help achieve their vision. Others do almost everything themselves, particularly on smaller-budget films. All directors, however, work closely with the producers, who manage the day-to-day business of making a film—producers are responsible for ensuring everyone is where they need to be, when they need to be there, and that all set design and art design is ready when it is scheduled to be shot. There is no right or wrong way to make a movie; what matters is what we see on screen. How the director achieves this is as individual as the films and their subject matter themselves.

See the following *Behind the Scenes* feature box for a glimpse into the working relationship between a director and editor.

Behind the Scenes: A Marriage Made in Postproduction

Martin Scorsese's editor Thelma Schoonmaker has worked with him on every film for 40 years. When an auteur finds a collaborator who shares his or her vision and can help achieve it, they tend to develop an ongoing working relationship. So, when thinking of the auteur director, we must also note their collaborators—producers, cinematographers, editors, composers—as many of the directors we think of as auteurs frequently work with the same crew of trusted craftspeople. Quentin Tarantino and Scorsese have both worked regularly with the cinematographer Robert Richardson. Tim Burton relies exclusively on Danny Elfman—the one-time singer of Oingo Boingo—to compose the scores for his films, which have included

Pee-wee's Big Adventure, *Batman*, *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, and *Alice in Wonderland*.

Considering Subject Matter

Subject matter over the course of a career is a crucial element of Sarris's version of the auteur theory of criticism. Are the movies directors make important to them on a personal level, or do they see themselves simply as guns for hire? A technical master such as Steven Spielberg or Martin Scorsese could, in theory, make any movie look good. Yet leading directors rarely take on projects whose subject matter doesn't appeal to them directly. Scorsese grew up in New York City and saw firsthand the tough kind of characters who would populate many of his films, such as *Mean Streets*, *Taxi Driver*, and *Goodfellas*. The characters, style, and action in the films ring true because of Scorsese's lifelong familiarity with the subject matter. He is a gifted enough director that he could fake it. But in a stunning scene like that in *Goodfellas* in which actor Ray Liotta as Henry Hill walks through a side entrance of the Copacabana nightclub with his future wife, Karen (Lorraine Bracco), through the kitchen and onto the club floor in one long take, Scorsese combines his filmmaking brilliance with a genuine knowledge of how people like Hill operated to create a remarkably authentic feeling.

Other directors, such as Danny Boyle and Jason Reitman, bring themselves to their subject matter in different ways. Reitman, the director of *Up in the Air*, *Juno*, and *Thank You for Smoking*, is the son of director Ivan Reitman, a director and producer whose films include *Ghostbusters*. Their films have different sensibilities, and they choose different subject matter, with Ivan typically making comedies, while Jason tackles drama (albeit mixed with humor). In an interview, the younger Reitman reflected on these different styles:

My father is the son of a Holocaust survivor. . . . He wants to make movies that make you happy. . . . I grew up in Beverly Hills and never had to worry where my next meal is going to come from. That affords you the ability to be more challenging. (Goodykoontz, 2009c, para. 11)

Each director, in other words, brings her or his own history and life experiences to films. One of the most ironic cases of the combination of director and subject matter is Francis Ford Coppola's selection as director of *The Godfather*. Coppola famously didn't want to direct it, in part because he wanted to concentrate on directing his own scripts and not major studio productions that he feared would prevent him from bringing enough of his own style and sensibility to the picture, and also because he worried about the negative portrayal of Italian Americans. Coppola was right; the studio interfered throughout, from casting (executives were especially resistant to hiring Al Pacino as



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Director John Singleton typically takes on similar subject matter in each of his films.

Michael Corleone) to the length of the film. Coppola fought to make the film the way he wanted, however, and the result was both a box-office sensation and what is generally considered one of the greatest movies ever made. Coppola didn't want to direct *The Godfather*

Part II either, wanting Scorsese to do it, but he eventually relented and created another masterpiece. In these cases, Coppola's ambivalence about the subject matter is overcome by his bringing his own sensibility and personality to the film, despite studio interference and other problems.

Some directors tend to use similar subject matter in most of their films. Take, for instance, John Singleton, whose debut film *Boyz n the Hood* set the tone of his subsequent films about young people in South Central Los Angeles. Or Kathryn Bigelow, whose films about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the hunt for and killing of Osama Bin Laden, and the Detroit riots all work with related subject matter.

See the following *You Try It* feature box to explore the idea of subject matter and a director's style.

You Try It: Stylistic Approaches to Race and Racism

1. Discuss the importance of subject matter in the films of Quentin Tarantino or Spike Lee. For example, Lee's *Do the Right Thing* tackles issues of race in 1980s Brooklyn; in Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds*, the subject is World War II, but it is seen through his unique vision.
2. Visit the following link, type "Do the Right Thing, Love and Hate" into the search bar, and watch the first clip in the list: <https://www.youtube.com/user/movieclips>. Then, type "Inglourious Basterds, The Jew Hunter" in the search bar and watch the first clip in the list.
3. How does the subject matter in each of these scenes reflect the director's style? How do the directors tackle issues of race in very different settings? Note in each how the camera treats its subjects. Look for symbolic action that gives us a clue to the director's perspective on the subject matter.

Developing Point of View

In some respects, the point of view of all films is that of the director, but sometimes films give the audience the view of one of the characters. In *Forrest Gump* or the original 1982 theatrical release of *Blade Runner*, we see the story unfold through the eyes of the central character: Forrest (Tom Hanks) in the former, Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford) in the latter. In both cases, the films use voiceovers to establish the first-person point of view. While neither Forrest nor Deckard is a completely reliable narrator—that is to say, they do not have an omniscient, or all-knowing, point of view concerning the story—they are nevertheless our entrée into the film, and we watch what unfolds as it happens to them, even as they comment upon it.

In other films, such as *Casablanca*, the director simply portrays the action, allowing it to unfold in front of the audience without comment, letting the movie speak for itself. The film is no less engrossing because of this; director Michael Curtiz relies on the brilliant performances of his

leads, Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman, along with a stellar supporting cast, to draw us into the film, even if it is only as an observer. We learn what the characters learn, when they learn it. In the case of *Blade Runner*, the voiceover was imposed by the studio, so Ridley Scott removed it from his 1992 and 2007 director's cuts of the film, preferring to let his use of the

mise-en-scène, cinematography, and editing convey the film's point of view.

In films such as *The Sixth Sense* (1999), director M. Night Shyamalan seemingly sets the story up from the classic third-person point of view; as with *Casablanca*, we simply watch the story unfold of a boy who believes he can see dead people. But at the climax of the film, we find that we have been fooled; while we know basically what psychologist Malcolm Crowe (Bruce Willis) knows, we know far less than his patient, young Cole Sear (Haley Joel Osment) knows. It is that unreliability of what we know, or what we think we know, that makes the film so satisfying (along with top-flight technical direction and acting).

Whether chosen by the director and cinematographer or written directly into the script, the most effective point of view for a film varies. Documentaries, for instance, are often more effective when they



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***Being John Malkovich* may be one of the more bizarre point-of-view films. This story offers a portal directly into the mind of the subject for whom the film was named.**

approach a subject with a specific point of view, not necessarily of a character but in the sense of conveying the filmmaker's attitude. Some audiences love Michael Moore; others hate him for the unabashed liberal viewpoint he brings to his films, such as *Bowling for Columbine*, *Fahrenheit 9/11*, and *Capitalism: A Love Story*. Yet without a point of view, his films might as well be televised news reports. Even though the documentarian is not always the most reliable narrator, his or her point of view is essential to making audiences care about the film and the subject it illuminates.

Point of view can also refer to how the audience sees individual shots within a film. (In horror films, for instance, we often see the terrified face of a victim before the director cuts to the insane killer wielding a knife, offering us both points of view.) This was discussed in the chapters on cinematography and editing, both of which are critical tools in giving the audience a character's point of view. Directors' choices establish their own perspectives on the content— and without a strong point of view, the story would flounder, making it all but impossible to keep the audience engaged.

Shaping the Story

In almost all cases, even if the director did not write a film, he or she has almost unlimited rein to shape the story as he or she sees fit. This may infuriate screenwriters and actors, but any enterprise as massive as the making of a film almost always works better with one person in charge. There is debate, for instance, about who should be credited with writing *Citizen Kane*; it is credited to both Orson Welles and Herman Mankiewicz, but how much Welles contributed to the shooting script is an open question. Kael wrote about Mankiewicz's contributions in arguing against the auteur theory. (Ironically, the only Academy Award *Kane* won was for the screenplay, shared by Mankiewicz and Welles.) However, there is no debate as to who shaped the story and, indeed, the entire film: Welles. Yet interestingly and perhaps tellingly, Welles shares the final screen credit with cinematographer Gregg Toland and is recorded as having stated that while preparing *Citizen Kane* he studied "the masters: John Ford, John Ford, and John Ford," running Ford's *Stagecoach* some 40 times for himself and his crew.

It was Welles's first feature film, and he was given **final cut**, or the final say on what is in the completed film, which is most unusual for a first-time director (studio executives often have the final say). But Welles would quickly prove that he was unlike any other director, new or experienced. His radical technique, including deep-focus shots (covered in Chapter 5) in which characters in the foreground and background remain in clear focus, shaped the story tremendously. Based in part on newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst, *Citizen Kane* is the story of a man who inherits great wealth and learns ambition. He wants to do good in the world, mostly as a crusading newspaperman, but he is eventually done in by his excessive appetite for power. Welles brilliantly uses the tools of a director to interpret the story. When Kane is flying high, for instance, he's shot from below, making him seem larger than life, someone in a position of power. Later, when he signs away part of his fortune, Welles puts himself at a great distance from the camera, almost in the background, tiny beneath enormous windows, giving the audience the sense of a small man, far less powerful. Welles is not only using the language of cinema; he is at times inventing it on the fly, shaping the story to his own will.

Other directors rework a familiar story into their own style. Japanese director Akira Kurosawa co-wrote and directed *Ran* (1985), based upon Shakespeare's *King Lear*. However, Kurosawa makes the story his own, in part by changing basic elements. Where *King Lear* has three daughters, for instance, Hidetora, the protagonist of *Ran*, has three sons. More strikingly, Kurosawa imposes his masterful technique, including the use of vivid colors, to give the film its own look and feel. Kurosawa's distinctive style, which



here includes managing a massive number of extras used in huge scenes, gives the film an epic scope. Kurosawa takes a wellknown story and, through his brilliance as

Courtesy Everett Collection

Director John Sturges took Kurosawa's tale of *Seven Samurai* and transposed it to Mexico, creating *The Magnificent Seven* (pictured).

a director, shapes it into something that is his own. Likewise, Kurosawa's fondness for American westerns led him to adapt their formulas to stories set in medieval Japan, and his films *Rashomon*, *Seven Samurai*, and *Yojimbo* were all later remade by others as westerns—the last of those also as a noir gangster film.

As is the trend in contemporary Hollywood, so many films we see today are, in fact, remakes of previous films, but this isn't an entirely new phenomenon. Numerous films since the very beginnings of cinema have been remade by other directors, demonstrating how the same basic material can be reinterpreted by different artists (or even by the same director at different times, such as Cecil B. DeMille and Alfred Hitchcock). Some notable films with three or more versions include *Dracula*, *The Maltese Falcon*, *The Front Page*, *Chicago*, *Beau Geste*, *The Shop Around the Corner*, *King Kong*, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, *The Sea Wolf*, and *Robin Hood*, and countless other films have at least two different versions. Some are very close remakes, using essentially the same shooting script and often even the same camera angles, whereas others may be completely rewritten and reimagined by later filmmakers. It is fascinating to see, with the advent of CGI technology, how Disney has set about remaking animated classics such as *Cinderella*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and *The Jungle Book*. Still other films have stood as such individual creations that no one has ever remade them, including *Citizen Kane*, *Gone With the Wind*, *Intolerance*, and *North by Northwest*. In the case of *Gone With the Wind*, it was producer David O. Selznick's vision that dominated, while the other three are very much distinctive works of their directors.

Working With Actors

Of all the director's many roles, her or his work with actors is the hardest to define; indeed, it's an almost mysterious ritual that varies among actors, directors, and movies. And yet beyond setting up shots and other technical work, the director's most important task is to coax a good performance out of his or her actors. It may involve pressure, praise, patience, or, more likely, a combination of all three. "The truth is, if you discourage an actor you may never find him again," the French director Jean Renoir said. "An actor is an animal, extremely fragile. You get a little expression, it is not exactly what you wanted, but it's alive. It's something human" (Stevens, 2006, p. 621).

On its face, coaxing the appropriate performance seems an almost impossible task—the actor is trying to bring something to the role, to the scene, that feels genuine. The director wants the same thing, of course, but the actor's version must mesh with the director's vision. These typically are not people with small egos or hesitancy when it comes to opinions on how things should be done. Somehow, actor and director must come together on what is needed, scene by scene, throughout the film, maintaining believability and consistency throughout. But how is this all accomplished?

Actors often repeat the same phrase when asked what they most desire in a director: that he or she makes them feel safe. They're referring to the freedom to take chances with their performances, the trust that the director will select the best take when putting the movie together. (Remember, many takes of the same scene are usually shot; the director pieces the film together from what he or she considers the best of the lot, much like trying to assemble a jigsaw puzzle.) It is a precarious dance between carrot and stick, one illustrated by the director George Cukor's remarks about directing Greta Garbo in *Camille*. Asked generally about the performance, Cukor said, "With Garbo you must create a climate in which she trusts you" (Stevens, 2006, p. 282).

Over time, some directors and actors are successful enough together that they work together again and again. This again echoes the theme of trust that an actor requires of a director to do her or his best work. Conversely, if that trust is missing, the work suffers.

An essential part of a director's makeup should be confidence—not just the confidence to choose the right take, to pursue the performance he or she wants, but also to trust the actors to make decisions about their performances, perhaps finding the right ingredients for the scene in the process. Director Mike Leigh is known for meeting with his actors for months

before a movie is shot, working out the characters with the actors instead of imposing the characters upon them.

Not every director shares the sentiment of finding safe harbor for actors to work in. Hitchcock famously allowed no improvisation, knowing exactly what he wanted from his cast in each scene. Among the many quotes variously attributed to him: “I never said all actors are cattle; what I said was all actors should be treated like cattle” (Brody, 2012, para. 2).

Whatever method the director uses to bring the proper performances out of her or his cast, as with every other element of filmmaking, the final results are what is most important. Talk of rifts between actors and directors fuels gossip magazines and television talk shows, but those are fleeting concerns. What matters to audience members is the film they see, not what it took to make it.

8.6 Challenging the Audience: Alternatives to Traditional Hollywood Style

As we have seen in preceding chapters, filmmakers very quickly established effective ways to tell a story cinematically, as opposed to merely recording performances of actors in front of sets. Techniques of cinematography, editing, and sound were discovered by trial and error, both to enhance the impact of a story and to make it easy for audiences to follow. The idea developed that films ought to keep viewers’ attention on the story without even realizing they were watching a film. Some storytelling techniques, however, challenge the audience to understand and enjoy a film, rather than make it easier. Others focus on specific styles of artistic interpretation of the story content, consciously rebelling against the conventional style and techniques used by most commercial movies.

In the heyday of Hollywood studio production, from the 1920s to the 1950s, each studio also had its own style. When a number of directors in a certain time or place display marked similarities in their styles, their collected work may be identified as part of a cinematic movement. The choice of which filmmaking techniques to use, and how and when to use them, can define a director’s personal style, but when numerous directors (usually in a certain place or time) use similar techniques, a style might be part of what is called a **movement**, which influences still other filmmakers. Some movements that ran counter to the traditional Hollywood style that many of the previously discussed directors used are as follows.

Dogme 95

Perhaps the most famous recent example of a cinematic movement is Dogme 95, which Danish filmmakers Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg came up with in 1995. (“Dogme” is Danish for *dogma*, which is a set of rules.) The directors, in a reaction to big-budget blockbuster films,

established a set of rules about how their films would be made, which they called the “vows of chastity.” They include, among other, more technical requirements:

- filming only on location
- using no background music or unnatural sound
- using handheld cameras only
- filming in color only without special lighting
- not crediting the director

While the purpose of Dogme 95 was to pare filmmaking down to its most basic form, without the trappings of big-budget movies, it greatly affected the ability to tell stories. For instance, it prohibited any superficial action, which is often used to help move along the plot of a typical film. Results have been mixed; critics and audiences have generally rejected most of the films made under the Dogme 95 rules, often saying that the ambitious stories they tell are too pretentious and too hard



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to follow. Thus, while not always successful (and even von Trier frequently ignores its precepts in his films), Dogme 95 does involve audience members in an important way, challenging them with a story that may be hard to follow, and at best the films are more appreciated than enjoyed.

Thomas Vinterberg's *The Celebration* was the first Dogme 95 feature film. Vinterberg was among an audacious group of young Danish filmmakers who rejected “Hollywood bloat” and embraced a low-budget aesthetic grounded in raw emotion and immediacy.

Other cinematic movements arose at different periods of film history in a variety of countries and gradually worked their way into many mainstream productions and especially into modern independent moviemaking.

German Expressionism

German Expressionism was a heavily stylized approach to visual art that purposely distorted things to express a psychological feeling or attitude about them. It began around the time of World War I and was adapted to film shortly thereafter, using stark architectural designs, a preponderance of jagged edges

and diagonals instead of vertical and horizontal patterns, and extreme contrasts of light and dark. Films such as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) were obviously artificial studio-bound creations, with distorted, painted backdrops and exaggerated makeup to express a troubled view of a troubled world. *Metropolis* (1926) was an artfully bleak

depiction of a future mega-city. Expressionism was not popular with average moviegoers when used in its most intense form. However, Hollywood horror films of the 1930s and crime thrillers of the 1940s and 1950s, later labeled as film noir, adapted its striking visual patterns to more realistic yet suggestive studio settings through artful arrangements of light, shadow, and camera angles. The style of films such as *Son of Frankenstein* (1939) had obvious origins in German Expressionism, as do *Batman* (1989), Tim Burton's *Corpse Bride* (2005), and many other films by Tim Burton. Likewise, later films such as *Sin City* and *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow* consciously imitate Expressionistic films from the past, now often using heavily stylized digital imagery to replace the heavily controlled studio look of their predecessors.

Italian Neorealism

Italian Neorealism as a movement grew out of necessity after much of Italy's film industry was destroyed in World War II. This movement consisted of movies that could no longer create artificial fantasy worlds with famous stars, and turned that disability to their advantage by using what they did have plenty of—reality. Well-worn actual locations and ordinary-looking, non-glamorous actors became key elements of this style. During the last half of the 1940s and into the 1950s, many filmmakers shot on real city streets and in real buildings (many still in ruins), often using non-professional actors, instead of using movie stars and carefully designed movie studio settings. Films such as Roberto Rossellini's *Paisan* (1946) and Vittorio De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* (1948) reflected everyday life while demonstrating that moving, human stories didn't need studio glamour. The grittiness of the stories told in this manner affected filmmakers around the world and helped inspire independent filmmakers without the means for lavish studio productions or expensive stars. Some of the Dogme 95 productions bear a resemblance to films of the Neorealism movement, but Italian Neorealist films did not reject enhancing the story with background mood music and continued to use



Mary Evans/Decla-Bioscop AG/Ronald Grant/Everett Collection ***The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* is one of the most famous and influential German Expressionist films. It set the stage for what could be accomplished if film were free to**

explore graphically the dark corners of the human psyche.

tripods and camera dollies when possible.

French New Wave

The French New Wave began in the late 1950s, when a group of film critics and movie buffs decided to start making their own films, using an eclectic blend of traditional techniques they admired, elements of Italian Neorealism, and new, experimental ways to tell stories on film. Many embraced handheld cameras and location shooting. Many decided to avoid traditional transitions such as fades and dissolves to mark the obvious ends of scenes, preferring to cut directly to new locations or to scenes happening the next day. Some preferred long takes, with

others trying very fast or unusual cutting choices. Many embraced the fact that films are, in fact, an artificial way of presenting reality,



Courtesy Everett Collection

Films like *The Last Year at Marienbad* (pictured) employ several filmmaking styles, experimenting with traditional camera and storytelling techniques.

Summary and Resources

incorporating jump cuts that had obvious continuity gaps but sped up the pacing of scenes, and “mistakes” such as lens flares from aiming the camera toward light sources, mismatched actions, and even characters talking directly to the audience rather than to other characters. They also were not afraid to have unhappy endings, plots that did not resolve the stories, or numerous unexplained story elements. Not all French New Wave films used the same styles, but all were drastic departures, in one way or another, from the style of filmmaking then being used by commercial studios. Major filmmakers of the movement were Jean-Luc Godard, François Truffaut, Alain Resnais, Claude Chabrol, and Éric Rohmer. Some of the key films include *The 400 Blows* (1959), *Breathless* (1960), *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961), and *A Married Woman* (1964). Noah Baumbach’s *Frances Ha* (2013) was a conscious attempt to recapture the feeling of French New Wave films.

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Chapter Summary

Although it takes many people to make a film, none is more important to the process than the director. Through a combination of technical skill, building a relationship of trust with actors, and following his or her personal vision of the film, the director serves as a master facilitator on set (and in the editing room). The auteur theory holds that the director is the author of the film, shaping it as a personal expression. This is not a foolproof theory but a useful starting point. Directors distinguish their films by their concept of style, subject matter, point of view, and ability to work with actors. All help the director to shape the story. The best directors use a cinematic vocabulary, even quoting from other films, to make the film that they want us to see; in effect, it is through the director’s eyes that we view the final picture.

A great deal of film analysis examines not only how filmmaking techniques shape the viewer’s understanding of a given film but also how their style fits into a director’s body of work, a studio’s output, or a cinematic movement. A film’s style is a recognizably consistent use of various cinematic techniques involving its mise-en-scène, cinematography, editing, sound, and overall structure. Many directors tend to favor certain techniques, thus establishing a personal style that distinguishes their work from that of others. When several directors in a

certain time or place display marked similarities in their styles, their collected work may be identified as part of a cinematic movement. Perhaps the most pervasive filmmaking style of the past century is that developed by the Hollywood studio system, but several internationally influential cinematic movements arose as alternatives, including Dogme 95, German Expressionism, Italian Neorealism, and French New Wave. Today’s directors may choose to incorporate elements of any or all of these styles while developing their own unique approaches.

Questions to Ask Yourself About Style and Directing When Viewing a Film

- What are the hallmarks of an auteur director?
- Does the director show technical competence, distinguishable personality, and interior meaning?
- Who are the director's regular collaborators?
- What are the distinguishing characteristics of the director's style?

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- Is the director's point of view evident?
- What elements of the film are similar to or different from past work by the same director?
- Does the director use any nontraditional storytelling techniques?
- What is the director trying to tell you through the film?

Key Terms

artfulness Subtle or imaginative ability, invention.

auteur theory A theory of film criticism, popularized in France during the 1950s, that treats the director of a film as its primary author. In certain cases, a particularly influential producer or screenwriter may also be considered an auteur filmmaker.

director The person with the ultimate responsibility for the overall film; the person who directs actors and the action while shooting, interprets the script through a personal vision, and decides the overall "look" with the production designer and cinematographer.

distinguishable personality Andrew Sarris's second prerequisite for an auteur, which is also the most widely accepted: that a director's personality can be seen in all of his or her works, over and above the contributions of others involved in making the film.

final cut The last edited version of a movie before it is released, approved by the director if he or she is powerful but subject to producer and studio re-editing if the director has less power.

interior meaning The third of Andrew Sarris's prerequisites for an auteur: that his or her body of work contain a possibly indefinable but consistent attitude and vision of the world, recognizable through the films' content and style.

movement An influential trend in filmmaking in which several different directors exhibit similar styles, usually occurring at a certain time and place.

stereotype An overly simplified characterization of something or someone, especially due to race, nationality, geographic region, or economic status, among other qualities.

style In film, the recognizable patterns in choices of various filmmaking techniques that may define an individual's work (auteur theory) and also help define a cinematic *movement*, such as Expressionism, Neorealism, and New Wave.

technical competence Andrew Sarris's first of three prerequisites for an auteur: that a director be able to make a competent film.

wide release A film distribution strategy in which a film opens the same day in at least 1,000, and possibly more, theaters across the country, as opposed to a limited release of only a few dozen to a few hundred showings that gradually move from city to city.